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SUBJECT: IAEA: Syria and Iran Display "Responsible" Interest in Nuclear Power

REF: (A) UNVIE 0640 (B) STATE 127468

¶1. (U) Summary: A December 2008 IAEA workshop on nuclear power infrastructure reflected how governments have improved their understanding of the complexities of developing, operating, and regulating safe nuclear power. This technical gathering advanced the U.S. goal of institutionalizing and improving the IAEA's growing role in nuclear power promotion. It also, unfortunately, provided a forum for Syria to depict itself having a benign interest in nuclear power and for Egypt to argue against "too much" transparency in this field. An issue for the year ahead will be how to ensure that GNEP and IAEA efforts in this area continue to be complementary, not duplicative. End Summary.

Pragmatic, Enthusiastic Engagement

¶2. (U) Coming just after a meeting and infrastructure workshop confined to Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) countries on December 8-9, the December 10-12 IAEA-sponsored "Workshop on Evaluation Methodology for Nuclear Power Infrastructure Development" demonstrated the Agency's progress in institutionalizing its role in promoting nuclear power. Over forty states, including both Syria and Iran, attended the technical meeting, which focused on assisting member states to prepare to address the infrastructure benchmarks associated with the introduction of nuclear power. The conference organizer, a U.S.-supplied Cost Free Expert at the IAEA, judged that workshop interactions were evidence that governments had improved their understanding of the complexities of developing, operating, and regulating safe nuclear power. In place of past, "glib" announcements of intent to construct nuclear power plants, participants focused on the practicalities and years-long processes of coordination among stakeholders, financing, human resource development, development of regulatory structures, and planning for waste management.

¶3. (U) The IAEA Secretariat used the workshop to highlight its new document on "Evaluation of the Status of National Nuclear Infrastructure Development," a follow-on document to its well received "Milestones" document on national nuclear infrastructure development released in September 2007. The workshop itself follows the November 2007 IAEA sponsored technical meeting where the "Milestones" document was released, and the Agency's December 2006 meeting on "Issues for the Introduction of Nuclear Power."

Roles of Iran, Syria and Egypt

¶4. (SBU) The Iranian delegation (two representatives, listed as N. Mataji Kojouri, and M. M. Alikhani) remained fairly quiet throughout

the proceedings. Conversely, Syria's Atomic Energy Commission Director Ibrahim Othman made several statements indicating Syria's serious intent to pursue civil nuclear power in a transparent and responsible manner, and potentially to have a nuclear power program operating in Syria "in ten years." Othman posed a number of detailed questions on the latter stages of nuclear power development, including on nuclear power plant finance and the handling of public opinion. Regarding Iran, Atomstroyexport's Leonid Yanko presented several slides on Russian "lessons learned" when dealing with new entrants to nuclear power that highlighted, besides projects in other countries, the work Russia has done to train Iranians to operate the Bushehr reactor (noting that training was included in the original reactor contract).

15. (SBU) At several instances during the workshop, Egyptian delegate Abdel Hamid questioned which of the nineteen infrastructure areas outlined in the IAEA Milestones document were most important and must be addressed first. The answer he consistently received from the Secretariat was that they are all important, and none could be avoided or deferred. In response to statements underscoring the importance of openness and transparency made in several presentations by both Member States and the Secretariat, Hamid commented that "transparency is not an absolute and should take into account a state's security environment" and requirements for confidentiality.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: While the majority of workshop discussion covered routine and technical material, several remarks stood out. Given the very early stages of Syria's civil nuclear power program, and the evidence of Syria's illicit activities, Othman's interventions seemed an attempt to project an earnest image of responsible interest in nuclear power and of development far beyond Syria's current capabilities. His remarks were significant in light of the

recent debate at the IAEA Technical Assistance and Cooperation Committee, which centered on concerns regarding a feasibility study for a nuclear reactor in Syria while it remains under IAEA investigation for conducting undeclared nuclear activities (ref a). On Iran, Russia's choice of highlighting cooperation on Bushehr as a case study for cooperation was unusual, particularly given the growing number of other international Russian engagements that could have been selected. This choice also conveyed an unhelpful tone of "business as usual" with Iran. Finally, Egypt's interventions questioning the Agency's nuclear development Milestones and the importance of transparency and confidence building were conspicuously out of step with the workshop's themes of responsible long-term planning for nuclear infrastructure development. END COMMENT.

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